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From Sorrento to Amalfi without the crowds



# EXPLORING THE SIREN COAST

WORDS and IMAGES : JANE GIFFORD



the fine Moorish architecture around Piazza Sant' Antonino, patron saint of Sorrento whose statue stands in the middle of the palm-tree lined square (left); the trompe l'oeil pillars and arches in the fifteenth-century loggia of the *Sedil Dominova* on Via S. Cesareo which has been the headquarters of the working man's club, *Società Operaia*, since 1877; the mauve wisteria arbours of the Excelsior Vittoria and the brilliant canary yellow church of Santa Maria del Carmine from Piazza Tasso.

## SAFE AND SOUND

Sorrento has a reputation for being one of the safest places to live in Italy. Cars are often parked with the key left in the ignition. Don't be put off by the heavy day-time traffic on Corso Italia (above), the one main road through town. The mountains rise straight up from the

**S**PRING is an excellent time to enjoy Sorrento and the Amalfi coast. The weather is mild, mopeds outnumber coaches on the famously narrow roads and Italian is still the main language in the tourist honey-pots. You probably won't get a deep tan, but you will be able to enjoy this popular region in Campania without the crowds. You might find time for lessons in cheese-making or even catch a glimpse of the mermaids, the sirens of legend who sang to lure Ulysses to these shores.

Evening is the best time to arrive in Sorrento. The place buzzes as young and old come in to town, filling the many bars and cafés with lively conversation. There are oranges on trees lining the streets and the scent of jasmine lingers in the air. Everything glows in the light of the lowering sun: the bell-tower above Corso Italia;

shore here and there is only a narrow strip of land to accommodate the single road through Sorrento and along the coast all the way to Salerno. At peak times it can be very busy, but you need only walk one block towards the sea and you are away from the rush.

All the locals love a good song, and an evening at Teatro Tasso for *The Sorrento Musical* can be fun. There is some impressive percussion. The audience usually joins in, so it helps to have a few drinks beforehand. You will know many of the traditional songs from the region – *O Sole Mio*, *Santa Lucia*, *Funiculi Funiculà*.

Sorrento faces the sea and is otherwise hemmed in by mountains. The town has an intimate relationship with both. I am staying at The Bristol, an awe-inspiring feat of modern architecture built into the sheer cliff face on the western edge of town with the best view



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over the whole of Sorrento and across the Bay of Naples to Vesuvius. Overlooking the fishing boats in the harbour and the rooftops of the colourful old buildings at the water's edge, it sits above Marina Grande. The short walk down into town passes beneath the towering cliff and a stream cascading down the rocks to the sea.

There are plenty of shops to enjoy in Sorrento. Leather goods are a speciality and *intarsio* and *intaglio* woodworking (somewhat like marquetry) are Sorrentine master-crafts. You can discover how it is done in the *Museobottega della Tarsialignea* in Palazzo Pomarci Santomasi on Via San Nicola. Lemons from Sorrento are said to be the best in the world (although Amalfitani would dispute this!), selling for twice the price of others. There are five to six harvests a year, and those harvested in spring are said to be best of all. There are two basic types – *feminello*, which are rounded, and *mascolino*, with a pointed end. They are the principle ingredient of *limoncello*, the favourite local tippie. Most places have their own recipe. Served in small frosted glasses, it's a fragrant and deceptively alcoholic end to most meals. On Via S. Cesareo at *Confetti e Agrumetti*, Antonino Esposito will show you how to make this and other *agrumetti*, - delicacies made from citrus fruit. Sorrentine tomatoes are also excellent, especially the sweet pink salad variety which can weigh up to 500g a piece, as is *aqua pazza*, a local sauce made from cherry tomatoes.

DELICIOUS DIET

If you like fish and seafood, then you will be spoilt for choice along the Sorrentine and Amalfi coast, with more than one hundred species for you to try. Amongst the best are gurnard, scorpion fish, grey mullet, monk fish, anchovies, fat red prawns, clams,

octopus, palamito, black spot sea bream and tuna. There are all the fabulous flavours we expect from Italian cuisine but with additional Greek, Arab, Spanish and French influences. My favourite place for lunch in Sorrento is *Vela Bianca*, tucked away on Marina Piccola. It's very popular with locals, boasting a huge range of the freshest fish and seafood, and the limoncello, a speciality of Head Waiter Michele Trombetta, is for me the best in town. It's less sweet than usual. After lunch you could take the ferry from the harbour nearby over to Capri.

*La Sorgente* (below), a working farm settled amongst shady orange and lemon groves in the mountains above Sorrento, makes a pleasant change from the town. Rosa Miccio will give you a guided tour of the old farm buildings and explain the traditions of making wine



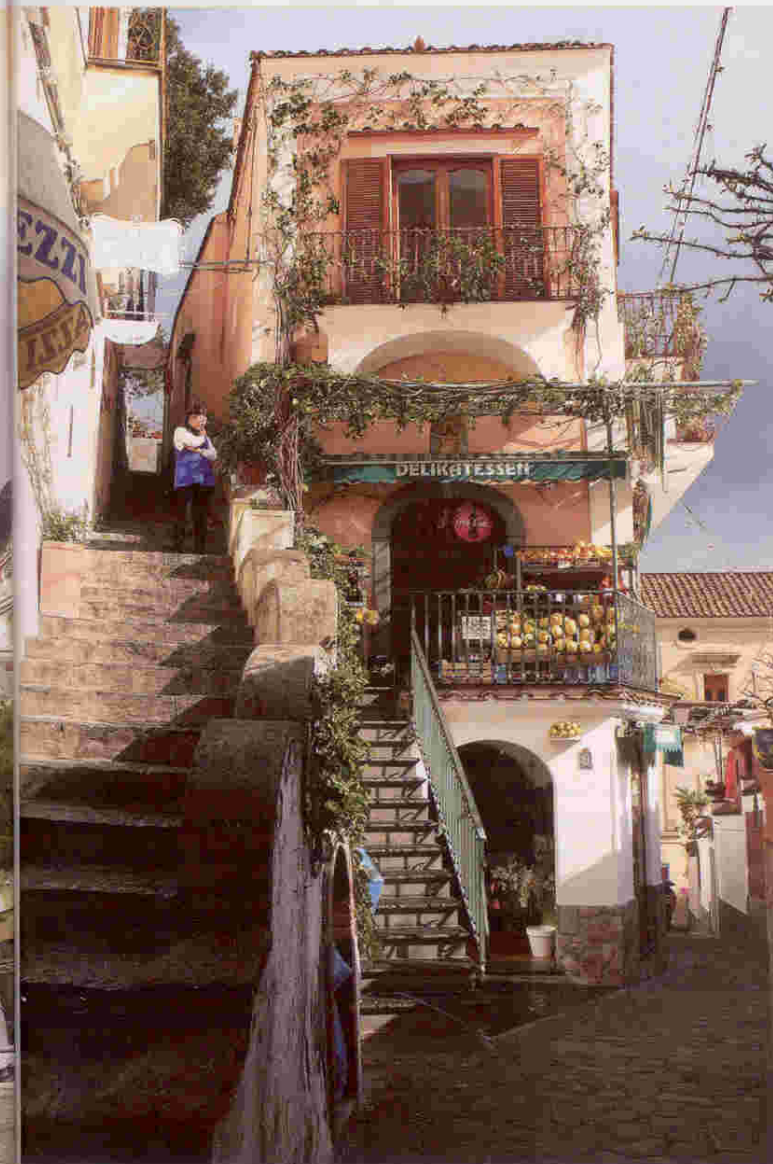
POSITANO IS THE MOST POPULAR RESORT ON THE WAY







THE SUNSETS FROM HERE ARE SPECTACULAR



and olive oil, and Maria Ercolano will show you how to make ricotta, mozzarella and caccio cavallo cheeses. Maria has been making cheese on the old range in the covered yard here since she was sixteen. Monks, from a nearby monastery hidden amongst the citrus groves, visit La Sorgente every day for the freshest of supplies. I take a walk through the trees then linger a while longer in the shade to eat a healthy lunch, all the wine and produce coming directly from the farm. There's also a huge range of jams and citrus goodies to buy.

#### DRIVING ROUND THE TWIST

The views are absolutely dazzling on the way from Sorrento to Amalfi on the SS163. For fifty miles, this notoriously narrow coastal road is a maze of sheer drops and around thirteen hundred tight bends. Positano is the most popular resort along the way. It's a pleasant place to stop off, although the lower part of town feels as if it has been abandoned to tourism (*left*), most of the locals living higher up the mountainside. I love the view of the town from the main road, houses perched dramatically on the steep cliffs, and from the beach, looking up across the boats and church to the soaring Lattari mountains.

Further on, the neighbouring fishing villages of Vettica Maggiore and Praiano have retained the feel of a working community. Their situation on the coast has made them famous for the rising and setting of the sun and moon. Praiano faces east, Vettica west. On the cliffs above the majolica-tiled dome and bell-tower of the Church of San Gennaro (*above*), the *Tramonto D'Oro* has been the pride of the Esposito family for fifty years. The sunsets from here are spectacular as the name implies. I find it hard to tear myself away from the view and the fabulous food. Dining on the balcony you can see right along the coast to Positano and way beyond to Capri. The beach of Cala della Gavitella to the west of Vettica is the only one on the Amalfi coast to get all-day sun. You can take a boat





THE JEWEL IN AMALFI'S CROWN IS THE MEDIEVAL CATHEDRAL



trip from the fishing harbour of Marina di Praia to the nearby marine cave, *Grotta dello Smeraldo*, with its luminous emerald and sapphire water and colourful rocks.

Ancient Amalfi is a truly unique place with a long, illustrious history as an independent sea-faring trader to rival Venice. From the sixth century and throughout the Middle Ages, its sailors plied the remote seas of the Orient forging strong links with Byzantium, with Constantinople and Syria. The town takes its name from Amalfi, a nymph beloved of Hercules who, legend says, had eyes the colour of the sapphire sea and who lies buried beneath the beach here. Luna Convento, on the seafront, was founded in 1222 by St Francis of Assisi and was converted into a hotel in 1821, becoming the first hotel on the Amalfi Coast and an essential stop on the *Gran Tour*. Breakfast or a drink in the ancient cloister is a rare pleasure. Wrought-iron tables and orange trees surround the old well (left), giant cacti grow up the walls, all overlooked by the thirteenth-century bell-tower. My room has a four-poster bed and a balcony overlooking the harbour, with centuries-old majolica tiles that match the colour of the early morning sea and sky.

#### THE ART OF PAPER

The old town, characterised by tunnels, narrow streets and multi-storey buildings, is sheltered behind a strong defensive wall and straddles a deep ravine in the Lattari mountains, the Valle dei Mulini, cut by the waters of the Canneto. A series of sluices and gullies powered the many paper mills which made Amalfi rich. The art of paper-making of the finest quality was learnt from trading with Arabia and it has been manufactured here for some eight hundred years. A restored mill dating back to the thirteenth century houses the *Museo della Carta* where you can learn this ancient art and make a sheet of paper yourself.



# details

## information



Tourist Information: AMALFI [www.amalfitouristoffice.it](http://www.amalfitouristoffice.it)  
 SORRENTO [www.sorrentotourism.com](http://www.sorrentotourism.com) POSITANO [www.positanoonline.it](http://www.positanoonline.it)  
 PRAIANO [www.comune.praiano.sa.it](http://www.comune.praiano.sa.it)  
 CAMPANIA [www.turismoregionecampania.it](http://www.turismoregionecampania.it)  
 Italian State Tourist Board [www.italiantouristboard.co.uk](http://www.italiantouristboard.co.uk)

## getting there



**Naples Airport (Capodichino):** British Airways & British Midlands fly daily  
 By car from Naples: A3 Exit Castellamare di Stabia, follow the SS145 Penisola Sorrentina, then SS163 Costiera Amalfitana  
 Express busses leave regularly from Piazza Municipio in Naples to Sorrento or Salerno. The journey takes around 90 minutes. Then pick up a country bus (SITA) which will take you round the coast on SS163 to all places mentioned.



## where to stay



**SORRENTO – The Bristol** Via Capo 22. Four star modern luxury built into the cliff high above Marina Grande fishing harbour. Superb view from all of hotel and restaurant over Sorrento and Bay of Naples. Great breakfasts made even better by view across to Vesuvius. Tel: (+39) 081 8784522  
**Web:** [www.acampora.it/bristol](http://www.acampora.it/bristol)

**PRAIANO – Tramonto D'Oro**, Via G Capriglione, 119. Luxurious, family-run modern four star accommodation, fabulous views and a chef specialising in the best traditional fish and meat dishes. Tel: (+39) 089 874955  
**Web:** [www.tramontodoro.it](http://www.tramontodoro.it)

**AMALFI – Hotel Luna Convento**, Via Pantalone Comite, 33. Amalfi convent on the coast founded in 1222 by St. Francis of Assisi. Hotel since 1821, the first on the Amalfi Coast and an essential stop on the *Gran Tour*. Still run by same family. Four Star accommodation steeped in nearly a thousand years of Amalfi's history. Tel: (+39) 089 871002 **Web:** [www.lunahotel.it](http://www.lunahotel.it)

## where to eat



**SORRENTO – Vela Bianca** Marina Piccola 11/13. Fab fish and seafood and best limoncello in town. Former fisherman's tavern. Tel: (+39) 081 8781144  
**Web:** [www.ristorantevelabianca.com](http://www.ristorantevelabianca.com)

**L'Antica Trattoria** Via P.R. Giuliani, 33. Over 50 years of excellent food and wine with a friendly welcome. Tel: (+39) 081 8071082 **Web:** [www.lanticatrattoria.com](http://www.lanticatrattoria.com)

**Il Buco** Il Rampa Marina Piccola. Chic and exclusive, highly creative, modern cuisine. Tel: (+39) 081 878 23 54 **Web:** [www.ilbucoistorante.it](http://www.ilbucoistorante.it)

**Il Caruso** Via S Antonio 12, Piazza Tasso. Paolo Esposito's imaginative restaurant and museum dedicated to one of the region's most famous sons. Tel: (+39) 081 8073156 **Web:** [www.ristorantemuseocaruso.com](http://www.ristorantemuseocaruso.com)

**AMALFI – La Caravella** Via Matteo Camera 12. Excellent restaurant popular with locals and tourists alike. Tel: (+39) 089 871029  
**Web:** [www.ristorantelacaravella.it](http://www.ristorantelacaravella.it)

**MAIORI – Torre Normanna** Via Diego Tajani 4. Thirteenth-century tower over the sea - restaurant, pizzeria, grand piano & cocktails, Lido in summer. Great location and menu, building with bags of atmosphere. Tel: (+39) 089 877100 **Web:** [www.torrenormanna.net](http://www.torrenormanna.net)

## things to do



**SORRENTO – Teatro Tasso – The Sorrento Musical** Piazza S. Antonino, 25  
 Tel: (+39) 081 8075525 **Web:** [www.teatrotasso.com](http://www.teatrotasso.com)

**La Sorgente** Via Atiglana 18. Lessons in cheese-making and farm tour and lunch in the hills amongst lemon groves. Tel: (+39) 081 8072618  
**Confetti e Agrumetti** Antonino Esposito Via S. Cesareo 51.  
 Tel: (+39) 081 8774781 **Web:** [www.confettieagrumetti.it](http://www.confettieagrumetti.it)

**Woodwork Museum & Shop: Museobottega della Tarsialigne** Palazzo Pormarci Santomasì, Via San Nicola 28. Tours by appointment.  
 Tel: (+39) 081 8771942

**PRAIANO – Light Festival** 1st -4th August **Web:** [www.luminariadisandomenico.it](http://www.luminariadisandomenico.it)

**AMALFI – Museo della Carta** Via della Cartiere 23. Restored thirteenth-century paper mill, museum and shop. Tel: (+39) 089 8304581  
**Web:** [www.museodellacarta.it](http://www.museodellacarta.it)

**Il Duomo** For visits to the cathedral Tel: (+39) 089 871324  
**The Celebration of Sant' Andrea** 7th June & 30th November

For more information including news and weather visit [www.italymag.co.uk/campania](http://www.italymag.co.uk/campania)

## AMALFI TOWN IS BEST APPRECIATED FROM THE SEA...

Passing through Porta della Marina and the narrow alleyways of Amalfi, Piazza del Duomo opens up as a wonderful surprise. Busy café tables surround a statue of St. Andrew, fisherman, first disciple and patron saint of Amalfi. His statue stands above a fountain where you can drink from a conch held by Pan or at a mermaid's breast, a wonderful mix of Christian and pagan imagery typical of the region. The jewel in Amalfi's crown is the medieval cathedral (*opposite, top*). Striped black and white and gleaming with mosaics, it dominates the square from the head of a steep flight of steps flanked by a twelfth-century bell-tower decorated with majolica tiles. The Basilica of the Crucifix dates way back to the sixth century. The 'head and other bones' of San Andrea are preserved in the Crypt. For the past seven hundred and fifty years, 'mana' has been collected in a crystal phial on the sepulchre above his remains, the object of intense devotion amongst the Amalfitani. In the thirteenth-century 'Cloister of Paradise', impressively tall palm trees are enclosed in a Moorish courtyard of slender white interlaced arches. I feel as if I have left Italy and been transported to Morocco.

Amalfi town is best appreciated from the sea, so take a boat along the coast. It's a great way to visit neighbouring Minori, a peaceful little fishing town with the impressive remains of an enormous Roman villa. End your day in Maiori in *Torre Normanna*, dining in a thirteenth-century defensive tower perched high on a rock jutting out into the sea. 